
Wrestling Observer Newsletter

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It will go down in history as the single most famous finish of a pro wrestling match in the modern era. Twenty or 30 years from now this story, more than any famous wrestler jumping promotions, more than any prominent death, and more than any record setting house, will be remembered vividly by all who watched it live, and remembered as legendary from all who hear about it later. Through the magic of videotape, the last minute of this match will live forever, and be replayed literally millions of times by tens of thousands of people all looking for the most minute pieces of detail to this strange puzzle. But the story of what led to those few seconds starts more than one year ago, far more reminiscent of the dirty con man past of the industry than the current attempted facade of a multi-million dollar corporate above board image those in the industry like to portray outwardly that it has evolved into.

October 20, 1996 - Bret Hart was in a hotel room in San Jose, CA, hours from making the biggest decision of his life--who would win the biggest bidding war in the history of pro wrestling. He had pretty well leaned toward staying with the World Wrestling Federation despite a much larger offer from World Championship Wrestling, but had changed his mind a few times over the previous two weeks as each side presented new offers. In the waning hours, Eric Bischoff and Kevin Nash were trying to convince him to change his mind and how great life was with an easier schedule. Bischoff was offering big money and a shot at becoming a movie star, a goal Hart had been pursuing while on a semi-retirement from wrestling since dropping the title to Shawn Michaels a few months earlier at Wrestlemania. Vince McMahon was offering him, in the now immortal words of Arn Anderson, not just a spot, but the top spot in the company, the chance to be a major part of deciding the future direction of the company, and almost literally, to be WWF 4 life. Many close advisers of Hart's tried to tell him going to WCW was the best move for his present, and more importantly, his future after wrestling. But largely out of loyalty, and that obviously wasn't the only factor involved, he declined the offer. McMahon, determined not to lose a very public fight, offered him the famous 20-year contract where he'd, after retirement in about three years, become almost a first lieutenant when it came to the booking process. Hart would earn somewhere in the neighborhood of \$1.5 million per year as an active wrestler, and a healthy but far lesser figure working the front office for the 17 years after retirement as an active wrestler. As part of McMahon's offer, he also was going to allow Hart to explain live on television his decision making process should be sign with WCW. Hart flew to Fort Wayne, IN, where the WWF was holding its live Raw taping after having already verbally agreed to the deal, signed the contract, and gave the interview saying basically that he would be in the WWF forever, figuring to be positioned as the top babyface and perennial champion until he finished his active career riding off in the sunset in a blaze of glory, like Hogan, Savage, and the rest of the superstars before him didn't. As is the case in wrestling, not all the promised scenarios that everyone believed were going to happen transpire as originally planned. And just over one year later, the feelings between McMahon and Hart had taken a 180 degree turn, to the degree nobody would have ever believed.

March 10, 1997 - Top babyface didn't last long as McMahon asked him to turn heel. At first Hart balked at the idea but after three days, McMahon presented him with two lists. One list was his prospective opponents as a babyface--Vader, Mankind and Steve Austin. The

other list was his prospective opponents as a heel, Undertaker, Michaels and Austin. Hart agreed for drawing money, his opponents as a heel made up a better list, and he and McMahon agreed that he would turn back babyface over the last few months of his contract and end his career on a positive note. He and Steve Austin did the double-turn at Wrestlemania. Hart himself then came up with the Anti-American angle, where he would remain a babyface in Canada and Europe and do interviews that would for the most part speak the truth, so he could when the time came to turn back in the U.S., have a reasonable explanation.

September 8, 1997 - Vince McMahon and Bret Hart had their first meeting where McMahon seriously approached Hart about his contract. About three months earlier, McMahon had told Hart that the company was in bad financial straights and that they might have to defer some of the money until later in the contract. This time his approach was more point blank. He wanted to cut Hart's regular salary, around \$30,000 per week, more than in half and defer the rest of the money until later in the contract period when hopefully the company would be in better shape financially. Hart declined the suggestion, because he didn't want to risk not getting the money in the future after he was through taking all the bumps.

September 20, 1997 - About one hour before the beginning of the PPV show in Birmingham, England, McMahon approached Davey Boy Smith and asked him to put over Shawn Michaels that night for the European title. Smith was apparently shocked, having been told all along in the build-up of the show, that Michaels was going to do a job for him, since Europe was promised to be "his territory." The explanation, which made and still makes logical business sense, is that they wanted to build for a bigger show, a second PPV from Smith's former home town of Manchester, England, where Smith would regain the title--the same scenario the WWF did to draw 60,000 fans in San Antonio with Michaels in the other role working a program with Sycho Sid. So while it all made sense, it was rather strange he wasn't approached with this idea until just before the start of the show. At around this same time period, McMahon approached Hart about working with Michaels. Hart said that he had a problem with that since Michaels had still never really apologized to him for the Sunny days comment, and said it would be hard to trust somebody like that in the ring and due to their past, and told McMahon that he would figure that Michaels would have the same concerns, since a few weeks earlier after first making it clear he would never work with anyone in the Hart Foundation, Michaels had finally agreed to work only with Smith, saying he couldn't trust Bret or Owen.

September 22, 1997 - On the day of the Raw taping at Madison Square Garden, McMahon told Bret Hart flat out that they were going to intentionally breach his contract because they couldn't afford the deal. He told a shocked Hart that he should go to World Championship Wrestling and make whatever deal he could with that group. "I didn't feel comfortable doing it," Hart said of the suggestion. "I feel like an old prisoner in a prison where I know all the guards and all the inmates and I have the best cell. Why would I want to move to a new prison where I don't know the guards and the inmates and I know longer have the best cell? I felt really bad after all the years of working for the

WWF." Hart had an escape clause built into his contract since he had so much negotiating leverage when making his WWF deal 11 months earlier, in that he could leave the company giving 30 days notice, and that he would have what the contract called "reasonable creative control" of his character during that lame duck period so that he couldn't be unreasonably buried on the way out. There was a window period for giving that notice and negotiating elsewhere that hadn't begun, so McMahon, showing he was serious, gave Hart written permission to begin negotiating with WCW and Hart contacted Eric Bischoff. The same day, during a meeting with Hart, Michaels and McMahon, Michaels told both of them point blank that he wouldn't do any jobs for anyone in the territory, word that when it got out made most of the other top wrestlers feel even more warmly than usual toward Michaels. Michaels later reiterated that statement to Hart on 10/4 in St. Paul when the two had agreed that for the good of the business that they'd work together. At the meeting, McMahon proposed a scenario where the two would have their first singles match in Montreal, where Undertaker would interfere causing a non-finish. This would lead to Hart wrestling Undertaker on the 12/7 PPV in Springfield, MA, where Michaels would interfere causing Hart to lose the title, as poetic justice since his interference caused Bret to win the title in the first place, and that Royal Rumble on 1/18 in San Jose would be headlined by Undertaker vs. Michaels. During the meeting, Hart told Michaels that he'd be happy to put him over at the end of the run, but Michaels told Hart flat out that he wouldn't return the favor to him. Michaels and Hart spoke again on the subject on 10/12 in San Jose, where once again Michaels told Hart that he wasn't going to do a job for him.

October 21, 1997 - McMahon approached Hart with the idea of losing the title to Michaels in Montreal, but promised that he would win it back on 12/7. Hart, remembering his conversations where Michaels was adamant about not doing any more jobs in the territory, was reluctant, saying after the way the angle had been done with him representing Canada and it becoming a big patriotic deal, that he didn't want to lose the title in Canada. He was then asked to lose to Michaels on 12/7 in Springfield, MA. Hart told McMahon that since Michaels had told both of them that he wasn't doing anymore jobs, that he had a problem doing a job for someone who wouldn't do a job back. He told McMahon that he didn't want to drop the title in Montreal. Later, McMahon, Pat Patterson, Michaels and Hart had another meeting where Michaels, teary eyed, told Hart that he was looking forward to returning the favor to Bret and once again talked about his mouth saying the stupidest things (in regard to saying he'd never do another job in the territory). Hart still refused to lose the title in Montreal. The night before he had been asked to put Hunter Hearst Helmsley over in Oklahoma City via pinfall due to Michaels' interference, but changed the finish to a count out. On this night he was asked to tap out to Ken Shamrock before the DQ ending involving Michaels, which he had no problem doing because he liked and respected Shamrock and wanted to help elevate him. The personal problems with himself and Michaels, which had become legendary in the business, resurfaced once again when the two and McMahon made an agreement to work together but to leave their respective families out of their interviews. It took just one week before Michaels did the interview talking about Stu Hart being dead but walking around Calgary because his body and brain hadn't figured it out yet. By this point, Hart had already stopped watching Raw because he had problems with the content of the show because he had four children that were wrestling fans that he didn't want seeing the direction it was going, so he was reacting to the remark based on the fact that his father and brother Owen heard the remarks and were upset about them.

October 24, 1997 - McMahon, before the show at the Nassau Coliseum, told Hart that the money situation in the company had changed and they would have no problems paying him everything promised in his contract. Hart told McMahon that WCW really hadn't made him a serious offer and that he really didn't want to leave but that he was still uncomfortable doing the job for Michaels in that situation. He left the country for the tour of Bahrain and Oman with the idea that he was staying with the WWF, but knowing due to his window in his contract, he had to make the decision to give notice by midnight on 11/1.

October 31, 1997 - Never one to work without a flair for the dramatics, Bischoff finally caught up with Hart who was basically incommunicado in a foreign land most of the week. Just one day before Hart had to either give notice or stay for another year, Bischoff made a huge concrete offer. We don't know the exact terms of the offer, only that Hart said of the \$3 million per year figure that both Jim Ross and Jerry Lawler talked about on the 11/10 Raw, that "they don't have any idea what I was offered," but others close to the situation say that figure is "close enough that you couldn't call it wrong." Hart neither agreed nor turned down the deal, but gave the impression to WCW that they had a great shot at getting him.

November 1, 1997 - Hart had until midnight to make up his mind. He called McMahon and told him about the WCW offer and said that he wasn't asking for anymore money to stay, but that he wanted to know what his future in the WWF would be over his next two years as an active wrestler and that at this point he was leaning toward accepting the WCW offer. McMahon said he'd think about it and call him back in one hour with some scenarios. Before McMahon called back, Bischoff called again trying to solidify the deal. McMahon ended up calling back four hours later from his barber shop in Manhattan and told Hart that he didn't know what he was going to do with him but to trust his judgement because of their past relationship, that he had many him into a superstar and that he wanted him to stay and that he should trust him and asked Hart to give him ideas of where he wanted to go. During the conversation, McMahon still brought up the scenario of wanting Hart to drop the title in Montreal, but promised that he would get it back in Springfield. "I realized he had given the top heel spot to Shawn, but to turn back babyface, it was too soon," Hart said. Like in the negotiations one year earlier, it was going down to the wire and he had until midnight to make up his mind. When he was talking to McMahon, McMahon told him he could extend his deadline for giving notice. Hart asked for the permission in writing but McMahon told him that he was going out to a movie that night with his wife and said that he was verbally giving permission to extend it and to get written permission from the company's Chief Financial Officer. When Hart called to get the written notice, he wasn't given it because he was told he couldn't get it in writing on such short notice. At 7 p.m. Bischoff called again and presented a deal that, according to Hart, "would have been insane not to be taken." At that point Hart was really having mixed emotions. He somehow felt bad about leaving the WWF and was just hoping McMahon would lay out a good set of scenarios for him and convince him to stay. At 9 p.m., McMahon called and, reversing fields once again, urged him to take the WCW offer. Hart told him that his heart was with the company and it would break his heart to leave, and that he appreciated everything McMahon and the company had done for him. McMahon told Hart that he wanted him back as a babyface, and had been wanting him to turn babyface for two or three months but just hadn't brought it up until this point. He then presented a scenario to Hart, presenting it as a way to get Hart to stay, but obviously designed to get Hart to take the WCW offer. He wanted Michaels to win the title in Montreal. For Springfield, they would do a Final Four match with he, Michaels, Undertaker and Ken Shamrock,

that Michaels would again win. At the Royal Rumble, the two would have a ladder match, which Michaels would win. On Raw on 1/19 in Fresno, CA, Hart would open the show and say that if he couldn't beat Michaels and win the title that night, that he would retire from wrestling, and in that match he would regain the title. And then in Boston at Wrestlemania, he'd drop the title to Austin. Hart looked at that scenario of four major losses with only one win and before his midnight deadline, gave official notice to the WWF and signed the contract WCW had sent over, with the agreement from all three parties that the word wouldn't leak out until 11/10 to protect the Survivor Series PPV. Hart went so far as to have his few confidants sign written confidentiality letters to make sure the word of his negotiations and signing with WCW didn't get out until 11/10.

November 2, 1997 - Hart and McMahon started a very amicable conversation with the pressure finally off and the decision for Hart to leave having been made. He again suggested that Michaels win the title in Montreal, and in what will go down as perhaps the ultimate irony, said they could do a screw-job ending to steal the title from him, and that the next night on Raw, McMahon suggested the two get into a mock argument where Hart would punch him, blaming him for the screw job. McMahon even suggested to hardway him (give him a hard punch that would either open him up or at least give him a noticeable black eye) to make it look legit. Hart again refused to do the job in Montreal, saying that he had never refused to do a job but he wasn't going to lose on Sunday or Monday (at the Raw tapings in Ottawa). He agreed to put Michaels over in Madison Square Garden on 11/15, Springfield, or anywhere else, and said he'd put over Vader, Shamrock, Mankind, Undertaker or even Steve Lombardi (who earned a title shot at MSG by winning a Battle Royal at the last show, but they dropped that idea almost immediately but there had been talk of giving Lombardi the match after all). McMahon then made legal threats to Hart if he wouldn't lose in Montreal. Hart talked about the clause in his contract giving him "reasonable" creative control, but McMahon claimed that refusing to drop the title in Montreal wasn't reasonable. The two argued about the finish in Montreal and the legalities of their respective positions all day Sunday and well into the night before finally agreeing to do a DQ finish in Montreal. Then in Springfield, in the final four match, Michaels would win the title. Bret would then go out on Raw on 12/8 in Portland, ME and give a farewell interview as a babyface to WWF fans and put the company and McMahon over as big as possible. He would apologize to the American fans and try to reasonably explain his actions as a way to end his 14-year association with the WWF on the highest note possible, something largely unheard of in pro wrestling, so that all parties and the fans could come out of it and his legacy with the company with a good feeling. Technically there was a problem, in that his WCW contract began on 12/1, so Hart called Bischoff, who when presented the scenario, agreed to allow him to work through 12/8 with Titan. Hart asked an associate who monitors news for him if he thought it was possible to keep the secret from the public until 11/10. Hart specifically asked about being able to keep it secret from one person until after the show, and the associate laughed and said they would bet a million dollars that person already knew.

November 4, 1997 - McMahon called Hart and said that he had changed his mind. He suggested now that Michaels should lose clean in Montreal, then he'd "steal" the title with a controversial finish in Springfield and Hart would get to do his farewell speech in Portland. He said he was going to call Michaels and present the scenario to him. By this point, word that Hart had signed with WCW had actually been reported the previous night on the Observer and Torch hotlines, and it was only about one hour later before the folks who call those hotlines for much of their news started breaking the latest "biggest story in the history of wrestling" as their "exclusives." In response, WWF Canada

released a press statement originally totally denying the story, claiming it was simply propaganda being spread by WCW. However, as the word got out, Titan Sports in Connecticut a few hours later contradicted that story saying simply that Bret Hart was exploring all his options, but not going any farther, with the feeling that they wanted to protect the PPV show. Hart wouldn't publicly talk to anyone.

November 5, 1997 - The Internet had paved the way for stories in the Calgary Sun, the Toronto Sun and one line in the Montreal Gazette in a PPV preview story about Steve Austin, a line which resulted in the paper getting an incredible switchboard-blowing response of phone calls. McMahon called Hart and said that Michaels had agreed to the previous days' scenario, but that now he had changed his mind. He said the news was out everywhere and that Bret had to drop the belt before Monday because he couldn't have Bischoff go on television on 11/10 and announce the signing of his world champion while he still had the belt. Hart said that he would get Bischoff to postpone the announcement, but with Bischoff on a hunting trip all week in Wyoming, Hart couldn't get a hold of him. McMahon then asked Hart to drop the title on 11/8 at the house show in Detroit. Hart again refused, feeling the way everything had been built up, he wanted the match with Michaels, which in the wake of all the insider publicity was building up a life of its own like no match in the recent history of wrestling, to not come off as anti-climactic and for that to happen he needed to go into Montreal as the champion. He said that he would drop the title any time after 11/12, suggesting he'd do it at the house shows in Youngstown, OH on 11/13, Pittsburgh on 11/14 or in Madison Square Garden if they wanted it that soon rather than waiting for 12/7. Jim Ross, on the company's 900 line, acknowledged the statement that Hart was exploring other options, said that nobody knows the real story, and in hyping the big match, tossed in the phrase they'd be pushing in the final days leading up to the match—it will be their first meeting in 18 months, and most likely the final match between the two ever.

November 6, 1997 - In a story in the Toronto Sun, Tiger Ali Singh, at a press conference promoting the WWF house show the next night in Toronto said of Hart's leaving, "It's very disheartening. He's not only been a mentor, but I've been a great admirer of him since I was a kid. And if he leaves, you're going to see a whole bunch of other people leaving. And I'm not going to mention any names but WCW has been approaching a lot of people."

November 7, 1997 - There is no question that the power of on-line services when it comes to influence of pro wrestling was established this past week. It was generally portrayed that it was a power struggle between Hart and Michaels, that Michaels had won out, and to a lesser extent Hart was leaving over the direction of the product. While there was some truth to all of this, probably the greatest truth of all is it was simply a manipulation by McMahon to get out of a contract that in hindsight he wished he'd never offered. Whether Michaels, who the wrestlers feel has McMahon's ear right now and has convinced him that what turned around WCW is Kevin Nash and Scott Hall, and not Hulk Hogan and Roddy Piper, and that he should and the company should do what they did to get WCW over. There is also feeling among WWF wrestlers that Michaels pushed McMahon in that direction to rid the company of his hated rival who had apparently one-upped him when signing the new deal that made him so much higher paid. Maybe it was simply economic because the company is in financial straights. Hart did have a lot of problems over the direction of the company and his own decision was partially made based on that, but it's clear, in hindsight, that McMahon had a strong hand in manipulating Hart's

decision to get out of the contract. In the vast majority opinion on-line from people who really had no clue as to what was really going on, Titan, McMahon and Michaels were coming off as major heels. The WWF's own on-line site, said to be the domain of young kids with no clue about wrestling, was besieged with the reports about Hart leaving and the so-called marks were reacting very negatively toward Titan to the point Titan pulled all its folders by the early afternoon, which caused another outcry of censorship of opinions from wrestling fans. Finally, McMahon responded publicly on-line with a letter of his own, stating, "Over the past few days I have read certain comments on the Internet concerning Bret Hart and his "alleged" reasons for wanting to pursue other avenues than the World Wrestling Federation to earn his livelihood. While I respect the "opinions" of others, as owner of the World Wrestling Federation I felt that it was time to set the record straight. As it has been reported recently on line, part of Bret Hart's decision to pursue other options is "allegedly due to his concern with the "direction" of the World Wrestling Federation. Whereby each and every individual is entitled to his, or her, opinion, I take great offense when the issue of the direction of the World Wrestling Federation is raised. In this age of sports-entertainment, the World Wrestling Federation REFUSES to insult its audience in terms of "Baby Faces" and "Heels." In 1997, how many people do you truly know who are strictly "good" guys or "bad" guys? World Wrestling Federation programming reflects more of a reality-based product in which life, as well as World Wrestling Federation superstars, are portrayed as they truly are--in shades of gray...not black or white. From what I am reading, it has been reported that Bret may be concerned about the morality issues in the World Wrestling Federation. Questionable language. Questionable gestures. Questionable sexuality. Questionable racial issues. Questionable? All of the issues mentioned above are issues that every human being must deal with every day of their lives. Also, with that in mind, please be aware that Bret Hart had been cautioned--on "numerous" occasions--to alter his language, by not using expletives or God's name in vain. He was also told--on numerous occasions--not to use certain hand gestures some might find offensive. My point is: regardless of what some are reporting, Bret's decision to pursue other career options IS NOT genuinely a Shawn Michaels direction issue, as they would like you to believe! In the personification of DeGeneration X, Shawn Michaels' character is EXPECTED to be living on the edge--which, I might add, Mr. Michaels portrays extremely well. The issue here is that the "direction" of the World Wrestling Federation is not determined by Shawn Michaels, OR Bret Hart for that matter. It is determined by you--the fans of the World Wrestling Federation! You DEMAND a more sophisticated approach! You DEMAND to be intellectually challenged! You DEMAND a product with ATTITUDE, and as owner of this company--it is my responsibility to give you exactly what you want! Personally, I regret the animosity that has built up between Shawn Michaels and Bret Hart, but in the end, it is the World Wrestling Federation that is solely responsible for the content of this product--NOT Bret Hart--NOT Shawn Michaels--NOT Vince McMahon, for that matter. May the best man win at the Survivor Series! .

That only made the situation worse in regard to how fans were viewing McMahon and the company even worse. "You demand to be intellectually challenged?" By doing racial angles. The fans chose that direction? They asked to see Michaels pull his pants down and jump up and down on television? Hart was booked for his first public appearance before the house show that night at the Sky Dome in Toronto. It was on a half-hour TSN (The Sports Network, the Canadian version of ESPN) talk show called "Off The Record." Host Michael Landsberg opened the show saying the show had received more than 1,000 calls to ask Hart if he was leaving for WCW. Despite the word being out everywhere by this point, Hart would only go so far as to say that he had given his 30 day notice to the WWF, that he's reviewing offers from both groups and is strongly leaning going one way. "I'd like to really come more clean on it than I can, you know, than I have, but I have to do this thing by the book kind of thing." Hart categorized the

split as not being a money issue but said that he and the WWF had "reached kind of a crisis or we've reached professional differences as to what direction that the wrestling shows are taking. You know, I'm not saying I'm always right, but I feel that some of the content of the shows goes against my belief in what wrestling should be, and can be." Later in the show he criticized Michaels, and then stated that "wrestling is often scoffed at as a form of entertainment sometimes, or it used to be. I believe it came way up, and I was very proud in the direction, which has a lot to do with where I am right now today. Wrestling was cleaned up, and it became something families could watch..." He talked about inner workings of the business, having to trust the guy you are working with because you give them your body and said the real animosities and hatred that exists have to be set aside. He said that everything he has said about Shawn Michaels is about the Shawn Michaels character, but said that Michaels has said things that have hit a raw nerve with him to the point it's unprofessional. The show aired the footage of the Shawn Michaels interview where he blamed the Hart Foundation for trashing the NOD dressing room and insinuating that Hart was a racist. Hart said that he doesn't blame Michaels for that. "That's obviously a promotional direction, and that's a poor concept. I think that racial tension is something to be very, very careful with. When you start messing around with racial things, that I don't like." Hart said that he stopped watching Raw about five weeks earlier because he didn't like the direction, and agreed when the host brought up Michaels calling him the Grand Wizard (a KKK reference, not a reference to a famous wrestling manager of the 70s), and then brought up what Michaels said about his father that he didn't see. "You know, I don't mind if someone pokes fun at my dad. Jerry Lawler's made a living the last two or three years saying comments about my mom and dad, but he's always fairly humorous about it. Actually I used to get offended at some of the things he used to say about my mother... until I realized that my mother thought they were humorous, and then it was kind of OK with me." He then spoke at length about Brian Pillman. By this point, in certain circles and particularly within the industry, interest in the match on Sunday due to all the uncertainty, some of which was known and most of which actually wasn't, had reached a level not seen in years. For all of Hart and McMahon's wanting to keep the story quiet, word getting out was the greatest thing for the buy rate. There were 14,374 fans paying \$296,674 at Sky Dome that night for the show. To credit the huge house to the interest in Canada since Hart leaving had been reported in the local newspapers would be incorrect, as WWF officials a week before the event had figured on a crowd of 15,000. Obviously some fans knew, and there were chants of "You sold out" directed at Hart. Although this should have been expected, and Hart has been a pro wrestler for 21 years and been around the business a lot longer than that, the chants in his home country knowing what he was going through did get to him. The main event was a six-man tag with Undertaker & Mankind & Austin vs. Bret & Smith & Neidhart, subbing for brother Owen who was supposed to start back but still wasn't ready to return after a severe concussion from a few weeks earlier. Bret was asked to do the job for the stone cold stunner, debated the question for a while, then refused, figuring he was the only Canadian in the main event in the U.S. vs. Canada type match with the big nationalistic angle, and Austin ended up using the stunner on Neidhart instead.

November 8, 1997 - The WWF ran a house show in Detroit at Cobo Arena for what would turn out to be Bret Hart's final match in the United States as a wrestler for the World Wrestling Federation. Tensions were really high and the prospects of a double-cross were looming by this time in many of the more paranoid types. By really, this was 1997, and this was the World Wrestling Federation. That's stuff from the 20s when the real bad guy low-lives were running the business. The days of making Lou Thesz world champion because you needed someone who could handle himself in the case of a double-cross had been over for more than three decades. That day, Hart went

to the one member of the front office he knew he could trust, Earl Hebner. While there are what you call a lot of good acquaintances in the business, Hart and Hebner were genuine close friends for years. Hart said he'd use his influence to get Hebner to referee the match because he wanted someone in the ring that he could trust. Hebner said he understood the situation, and told Hart, "I swear on my kids lives that I'd quit my job before double-crossing you." On a personal basis a little more than 24 hours later, remembrance of that conversation crushed him more than anything. At about the same time, the WWF braintrust was in Montreal one day early. Vince McMahon held a meeting at the hotel with Jim Ross, Jim Cornette, Pat Patterson and Michaels. Reports are that at least two of the aforementioned names looked extremely uncomfortable leaving the meeting. Ross, on the WWF 900 line, filed a report saying due to the tension between Hart and Michaels that there would be armed security backstage and the two would dress as far apart from each other as possible. That was a total work since Michaels and Hart actually dressed together and were on professional terms the next afternoon. He also said that McMahon was not going to announce the show, and instead would be handling any last minute problems backstage. Ross also hinted that it could be Hart's final match in the World Wrestling Federation, something Hart at that point wasn't aware of.

NOVEMBER 9, 1997

The Prelude - Imagine going into the most anticipated match on the inside of pro wrestling in years and on the day of the show, not having any semblance of a finish? McMahon and Hart met that afternoon and McMahon said something to the effect of, "What do you want to do? You've got me by the balls." Hart said that he just wants to leave the building with his head up. Hart said to McMahon, "Let me hand you the belt on Raw (the next night in Ottawa). Everyone knows I'm leaving. I'd like to tell the truth on Raw Monday." At this point the "truth" wouldn't include talking about finances, contract breaches, arguments about finishes or anything that would make McMahon or the company look bad publicly. McMahon said he agreed, that it was the right thing to do and the two shook hands on it. Hart and Michaels were dressing together putting together a match. Both were professional with one another and talking about putting on the best match possible in Hart's last hurrah, agreeing to a DQ finish in about 17:00 after a lengthy brawl before the bell would even sound to start the match. As they were putting their spots together, Patterson came in. He had a suggestion for a high spot in the match as a false finish. There would be a referee bump. Michaels would put Hart in his own sharpshooter. Hart would reverse the hold. Hebner would still be down at this point and not see Michaels tap out. Hart would release the hold to revive Hebner. Michaels would hit him when he turned around with the sweet chin music. A second ref, Mike Ciota, would haul ass to the ring and begin the count. A few paces behind, Owen Hart and Smith, and possibly Neidhart as well, would run down to the ring. Ciota would count 1-2, and whomever got to the ring first, likely Owen, would drag Ciota out of the ring. While they think they've saved the day on the pin on Bret, suddenly Hebner would recover, 1-2, and Bret would kick out. That would set the pace for about five more minutes of near falls before it would end up in a disqualification ending. Before the show started, both Vader, with his Japanese experience, and Smith, told Hart to watch himself. He was warned not to lay down and not to allow himself to be put in a compromising position. He was told to kick out at one, not two, and not to allow himself into any submission holds. Hart recognized the possibility of the situation, but his thoughts regarding a double-cross were more along with lines of always protecting himself in case Michaels tried to hit him with a sucker punch when he left himself open. The idea that being put in a submission or one of the near falls while working spots would be dangerous for him would be something to worry about normally, but he put it out of his mind because he had Hebner in the ring as the referee.

The match: People on the inside were watching this as close as on the outside. Would Bret do the job? Would Shawn do the job? Would Bret give Shawn a real beating before putting him over? The Molson Center was packed with more than 20,000 rabid fans, who up to that point had seen a largely lackluster undercard. While the fear going in about the word getting out of Hart leaving hurting the PPV most likely turned out to be just the opposite, the sellout was not indicative of that either as it was well known by the advance that the show was going to sellout one or two days early. It appeared that about 10 to 20 percent of the crowd knew Hart was leaving, and there were negative signs regarding his decision, and negative signs toward the promotion for picking Michaels above him or the direction that seemingly forced him to leave. Some things were also strange, and not just the absence of McMahon from the broadcast. Hart, the champion in the main event, wasn't scheduled for an interview building up the match. When his name was announced early in the show, there were many boos from fans who knew he signed with the opposition. Once he got in the ring for the introductions, Michaels wiped his butt, blew his nose and then picked his nose with the Canadian flag. He then put the flag on the ground and began humping it. Hart was immediately established as the babyface. The two began the match as a brawl all around ringside and into the stands. The crowd was so rabid that it appeared there was genuine danger they'd attack Michaels. At one point, they were brawling near the entrance, knocking down refs as planned, knocking down Patterson, as planned, and as planned, Hart and McMahon had an argument almost teasing the idea of a spot later in the match where Hart would deck McMahon. But it was also clear that everything going on was 100% professional and the only curiosity left at that point was how good the match was going to be (it appeared to be very good) and how would they get "out" of the match (with something nobody will ever forget). But one thing was strange. Why were so many agents circling the ring, and why was McMahon right there, and acting so intense? About eight minutes before the show was "supposed" to end, Bruce Prichard, in the "Gorilla" position (kind of the on-deck circle for the wrestlers) was screaming in his headset that we need more security at the ring. Why? They had already done the brawl in the crowd. The finish was going to be a DQ and it was still several minutes away.

The double-cross: Hart climbed the top rope for a double sledge on Michaels. Michaels pulled Hebner in the way and Hart crashed on him. Just as planned. Michaels for a split second, looked at McMahon and put Hart in the sharpshooter, just as planned. The next split seconds were the story. Ciota, listening to his headpiece for his cue to run-in, heard the backstage director scream to Hebner that it was time to get up. Hebner, listening himself, immediately got up. Ciota started screaming that he wasn't supposed to get up. Owen Hart and Smith, readying their run in, were equally perplexed seeing him get up. Prichard was freaking out backstage saying that wasn't supposed to happen. Bret, still not realizing anything was wrong, laid in the hold for a only a few seconds to build up some heat before doing the reversal. Michaels cinched down hard on the hold, glanced at Hebner and then looked away, which more than one wrestler in the promotion upon viewing the tape saw as the proof he was in on it, but then fed Bret his leg for the reversal. Hebner quickly looked at the timekeeper and screamed "ring the bell." At the same moment, McMahon, sitting next to the timekeeper, elbowed him hard and screamed "ring the f***in bell." The bell rang at about the same moment Bret grabbed the leg for the reversal and Michaels fell down on his face on the mat. Michaels' music played immediately and was immediately announced as the winner and new champion. Hebner sprinted out of the ring on the other side, into the dressing room, through the dressing room, and into an awaiting car in the parking lot that already had the motor running and was going to take him to the hotel, where he'd be rushed out of town with his ticket home, instead of staying to work the two Raw tapings.

Michaels and Hart both leaped to their feet looking equally mad, cursing in McMahon's direction and glaring at him. Hart spit right in McMahon's face. The cameras immediately pulled away from Hart and to Michaels. Vince screamed at Michaels to "pick the f***in belt up and get the f*** out of there." Michaels, still looking mad, was ordered to the back by Jerry Brisco who told him to hold the belt up high and get to the back. The show abruptly went off the air about four minutes early.

The aftermath: The officials left the ring immediately. McMahon went into his private office in the building with Patterson and a few others, and locked the door behind him. Hart, in the ring, flipped out on the realization of what happened, and began smashing the television monitors left behind until Owen, Smith and Neidhart hit the ring to calm him down. The four had an animated discussion in the ring, all looking perturbed. Finally, Hart thanked the fans, who for the most part left with the air let out of their sails, gave the "I love you" sign to the fans, and finger painted "WCW" to all four corners of the ring, which got a surprisingly big pop, and went back to the dressing room. He first confronted Michaels, who swore that he had nothing to do with it. Michaels, obviously afraid Hart would punch him out right there, told Hart that he gets heat for everything that happens but this time it wasn't his fault and he was as mad as Hart about the finish. He said he didn't want to win the belt that way, was disgusted by what happened, and to prove it, would refuse to bring the belt out or say anything bad about Hart on Raw the next night. Hart said that Michaels could prove whether he was in on it or not by his actions on television the next night. The entire dressing room was furious at McMahon by this point. The feeling was that if Hart, having worked for the company for 14 years and not missing shots due to injuries the entire time, and having made McMahon millions of dollars throughout the years, could get double-crossed this bad, then how could any of them trust anything he would say or do? People were saying that how could anyone trust anyone ever again, and that it was an unsafe working environment.

For three years, after the steroid trial and all the bad publicity, McMahon had worked feverishly to change his legacy in the industry as not the man who ran all the other promoters out of business, not the man who marketed pro wrestling to young children while pushing steroid freaks, not the man who tried to destroy wrestling history and create his own, not his worked Harvard MBA, worked billion dollar company, a man who was so vain as to give himself a huge award in Madison Square Garden as "the genius who created Wrestlemania," not the man who at one time tried to monopolize every aspect of the business for himself, but instead as a working man's hero, coming from humble beginnings, fighting those ruthless rich regional promoters and through nothing but guts, guile and vision, became the dominant force in the industry and taking it to a new level. And now, against all odds, the generous friend trying to help all the small regional promoters, acknowledging the past history of the business, fighting against Billionaire Ted, the man who was stealing all his self-made creations while wasting his stockholders money because of some alleged petty vendetta because the WWF would never be for sale, stealing his patented idea of Monday night wrestling, was hanging in there and would outlast his enemy again and somehow in the end come out on top. Three years of a facade, that was largely working to a new generation of wrestling fans who saw him as their underdog hero. The man who to a generation that didn't know better, created pro wrestling, Hulk Hogan and localized interviews and rose this grimy little industry from carnival tents to major non-smoking arenas and who was the friendly face in the Father Flanagan collar who every Monday night epitomized the world of pro wrestling, was flushed down the commode. Even though he was so good at hiding who the old Vince McMahon was to the point only those who had dealt with him for many years remembered about not letting your guard down, when the pressure

was on, the old Vince returned. Only this time, it was in a situation where those who didn't "know" him were truly "introduced" to him for the first time.

Undertaker was furious, pounding on his locked door, and when he came out to talk with him, Undertaker told him in no uncertain terms that he needed to apologize to Hart. He went to Hart's dressing room, where Hart had just come out of the shower. Smith answered the door and Hart said he didn't want to see him. Vince and son Shane McMahon came in with Sgt. Slaughter and Brisco anyway. Vince started to apologize, saying that he had to do it because he couldn't take the chance of Hart going to WCW without giving back the belt and he couldn't let Bischoff go on television the next night and announce Hart was coming while he was still his champion and said how it would kill his business. Hart shot back that he had no problem losing the belt and told McMahon that he was going to dry off and get his clothes on and told McMahon, "If you're still here, I'm going to punch you out." Hart called McMahon a liar and a piece of shit, and talked about having worked for him for 14 years, only missing two shots the entire time, and being a role model for the company and the industry and this was his payback. McMahon tried to say that in 14 years, this was the first time he'd ever lied to him and Hart rattled off 15 lies over the last year alone without even thinking about it. Those in the dressing room watching were stunned listening to Hart rattle them off, and McMahon not offering a comeback. Hart got dressed and twice told McMahon to get out. Hart got up, and a scuffle started, with them locking up like in a wrestling match, Hart breaking free, and throwing a punch to the jaw that would have knocked down a rhino. One punch KO in 40 seconds. McMahon growled like he was going to get up, but he had no legs. Shane McMahon jumped on Hart's back, and Smith jumped on Shane's back pulling him off. Not realizing there would be trouble, Smith had already taken off his knee brace, and hyperextended his knee in the process of pulling Shane off. Hart nearly broke his hand from the punch. McMahon's jaw was thought to be fractured or broken. Hart asked Vince if he was now going to screw him on all the money he owes him and a groggy Vince said "No." He told Shane and Brisco to get that "piece of shit" out of here and glaring at both of them, told them if they tried anything, they'd suffer the same result. In dragging McMahon out, someone accidentally stepped on his ankle injuring it as well.

And later: Hebner, at the hotel and on his way out of town, was confronted by one of the wrestlers who asked how he could do that to one of his best friends. Hebner claimed ignorance and swore that he knew nothing about it and was so mad about it he was going to quit. Jack Lanza, likely as part of another facade, was begging him not to. Patterson, Michaels and Prichard all denied any knowledge to the boys. Everyone denied it, but it was clear everyone had to know, from the production truck to go off the air several minutes early, to the director to get the shot perfect of the sharpshooter where you couldn't see Bret's face not quit, to Hebner in particular, to the ring announcer to get the announcement so quickly, so the man handling the music to have Michaels music all cued up, to all the agents, who were surrounding the ring knowing the possibility of something unpredictable happening. When Hart got back to his hotel room in a total daze, he was furious at McMahon because he knew he was screaming at the timekeeper to ring the bell but almost recognizing it as a reality of a business that he should have known better than anyone. But when he had a tape of the finish played to him, he clearly heard that it was Hebner's voice screaming "ring the bell" and at that point was personally crushed. Phone lines were ringing off the hook around wrestling-land that night. People closest to the inside of the business were thinking double-cross, although the big question was whether Michaels, since he looked so pissed at the finish, was in on it. Some

more skeptical types, remembering Brian Pillman and Kevin Sullivan, thought it because of the prominence of the match and the interest, that it had to be a very well acted work. Virtually all the wrestlers backstage thought it was a double-cross, but a few, not wanting to be marks, were wary of fully committing to the idea. Some people who were close to inside thought it was the greatest worked finish in the history of wrestling, because it got everyone talking. Others, particularly people who had casual fans watching with them, or those attending the show live, saw how the finish to a casual fan came off looking so badly, thought it was either a poorly conceived angle that was well acted by a company trying too hard to fool smart fans; or maybe a double-cross. But by the morning the true story had become obvious.

November 10, 1997 - When the wrestlers fully realized what had happened, Hart turned into almost a cult hero, and McMahon's image took an incredible tumble. Hart himself remarked that while he had his problems with McMahon in the late 80s, that when Phil Mushnick wrote all those scathing articles about him during the 90s, he defended McMahon, even though he deep down knew most of what was written about him to be true. According to two WWF wrestlers, roughly 95 percent of the wrestlers in the company were planning on boycotting the Raw taping later that night over what happened. But as the day went on, the talk simmered down, Hart told those who asked him that since they had children and mortgages, that they shouldn't risk breaching their contract and should go. However, Owen Hart, Smith, Neidhart and Mick Foley were so upset they all flew home, missing the tapings both this night and also in Cornwall, ONT the next night. Many were saying they could no longer work for someone who would do something like that. While rumors abounded about Hart, Smith and Foley all quitting, at press time it appeared none of the three truly knew their future but that they all had a bitter taste in their mouth for the company. They weren't the only ones. Most of the wrestlers were there and with none of the Hart family around, McMahon gave his side of the story. He portrayed it as if Hart had agreed to drop the title in Montreal, but when he got to the building, he said he was a Canadian hero and an ICON and refused to drop the title and said Hart said he would give the belt to McMahon on Raw the next night and refused to ever drop it. Reports were that by this time few if anyone in the dressing room believed a word of it. Most of the wrestlers by this time knew Hart was more forced out than voluntarily leaving over money, although knowing he had signed a great money deal. Most of the heat was on Michaels, with the belief that Michaels was younger and more in Vince's ear and there was a lot of bitterness because it wasn't a secret by this point that Michaels had told people on several occasions that he would never do a job in the territory. The show went on in Ottawa, but not before Bischoff had already announced on Nitro one hour earlier, in what was the same angle he's done so many times to tease and deliver the opposite, that Bret Hart had signed with the NWO. Bischoff opened the show with the entire NWO holding Canadian flags, and badly mockingly singing "Oh Canada." WCW announcers Tony Schiavone, Mike Tenay and Larry Zbyszko talked for most of the first hour about the announcement, with Schiavone and Tenay, likely on orders from Bischoff, acting stunned, describing Hart as a second generation wrestler who stands for tradition, in other words positioning him as another Curt Hennig or Jeff Jarrett, rather than the level of a Hulk Hogan to justify a nearly \$3 million per year salary. Zbyszko was the one who acted as if he didn't believe it. In the first commercial break, Gene Okerlund did a 900 line tease saying how Bret Hart punched out a prominent official and he'd have the story on his hotline, which did huge business. During the hotline, because of fear of legal repercussions, the story wasn't told until late in the report, only a sketchy version told, and McMahon's name was never mentioned. With more curiosity than anything in recent memory, the WWF drew its strongest Raw rating since the early days of the Monday Night War--a 3.39 rating and 5.16 share--largely due to curiosity stemming from the

publicity, the match, and from the announcement about Hart earlier in the event on WCW--and amidst all the chaos and confusion, presented one of its all-time worst shows. Nitro did a phenomenal 4.33 rating and 6.39 share. Michaels opened the show. Yes, he was carrying the belt. And what did he say about Hart? He said he beat the man in his own country with his own hold and that he ran him out of the WWF to be with all the other dinosaurs down South. And said that the few down there who weren't dinosaurs are his good friends and some day they'd kick his ass too. Those who were on the fence on the Michaels issue waiting for his interview to prove himself were given their final answer. McMahon never showed his face on camera. The fight with Hart was never acknowledged in the commentary, although Michaels couldn't resist in his interview saying how Hart beat up a 52-year-old man after the show. In the commentary, nobody tried to bury Hart, but Ross, who had never used this figure before, on both Sunday and Monday used the phrase 21-year-veteran, perhaps as subtle acknowledgement of Hart's age, and Lawler did bring up the \$3 million per year figure, as a way to encourage the mindless "You sold out" chants. It was acknowledged that it was Hart's final match in the WWF although the reasons for it being the case were never even hinted at. The replay was pushed harder than ever, and why not, since it was the most bizarre finish in modern wrestling history, complete with a commercial clearly showing Hart spitting in McMahon's face, and destroying the monitors which took place after the show itself had gone off the air. The show dragged on, and the efforts to push the new stars, Mero as a heel, Goldust back as a heel, Interrogator, Blackjack Bradshaw and Road Dog & Billy Gunn, all came off lame. You could almost hear the crowd groan when it was Rocky Maivia positioned as the next challenger for Steve Austin's IC title. With all the special effects, the Kane gimmick still came across as a sure winner. And Ken Shamrock was thrust into the spotlight as Michaels' first challenger on 12/7 after all. However, there was another screw up. Shamrock's main event with Helmsley was supposed to end with Michaels interfering and then Shamrock pinning him and the ref counting to three, perhaps to take heat off Michaels rep for not doing jobs, and perhaps as a way to convince Shamrock to return the favor for such an unpopular wrestler on PPV. However, the show went off the air with Shamrock down apparently being pinned after Michaels nailed him with the briefcase, however he kicked out just as the show went off the air. The crowd in Ottawa, largely pro-Hart, finally figured out about 15 minutes before the show was going off the air, that none of the Hart Foundation was there, and that the Bret Hart situation was no angle. The Shamrock-Helmsley main event heat was non-existent, drowned out by vehement chants of "We Want Bret." Ross went on his hotline and did nothing but praise Hart for all his work, even to the point of saying that he himself, being right there, never heard a submission but that the referee claimed that he heard it.

November 11, 1997 - The Calgary Sun ran an article about the double-cross, reporting that Hart's leaving for WCW was actually requested by the WWF due to the WWF claiming financial hardships.

And where does it go from here: It's hard to make sense out of all that happened. While Hart's contract with the WWF was much higher than anyone else's, to dismiss him as being paid above market value is missing a potential valuable point. What is the Canadian wrestling market worth? Far more than \$1.5 million per year. At the Calgary Stampede PPV show alone, the market was worth about \$400,000 on PPV and another \$200,000 in live gate, granted those are Canadian money and he was being paid in American money, but you get the drift. While WWF had lost its foothold in the United States to WCW, it owned Canada. WCW, with TBS getting moved from premium cable to basic cable nationwide, and with TSN picking up Nitro every week, was for the first time getting strong television exposure in the country. No

matter what he did or didn't mean elsewhere, and there is no denying he was a major draw in the United States, and probably more so in Europe, Germany in particular, he was the wrestling star in Canada. Handing him to the opposition will mean from a Canadian standpoint, every bit as much as Hulk Hogan joining with WCW, and we've all seen what the long-term effects of that turned out to be. It's hard to ascertain fan reaction. Fans are more loyal these days to brand names than ever before, more than to wrestlers themselves. When, in a similar situation only he didn't get into the ring and was fired before "not" doing the job, Ric Flair came out of a situation with Jim Herd in 1991 recognized by most fans as the real world champion, the WCW belt became largely meaningless, Flair went to WWF and did big business in what were never called unification matches but many thought of them as such against Hulk Hogan. For nearly two years, before Flair returned as the cult hero, the small crowds attending WCW matches never stopped the "We Want Flair" chants. There are similarities here, and if anything, times being different mean more people than ever will be aware of it, making similar chants perhaps more likely. But a lot of the newer fans also for the most part have less respect for the wrestlers as people and more as animals to perform stunts to entertain them, like in other sports, have more loyalties to the "home team" than its players who come and go for the biggest buck. And while everyone will put their different spin on what happened, and like with Hogan, and Bruno, and nearly every other superstar of the WWF beforehand, Bret Hart failed one of the things he wanted most out of his career, and that was to walk away from the company without the bitterness and with mainly good memories. Both Bret Hart and Vince McMahon wanted their legacies to be tied together and represent all that can be good about pro wrestling. But the fact it is, no matter how great the match with Smith at Wembley Stadium or at the In Your House in Hershey were, or the Wrestlemania match and SummerSlam matches with Owen were, or the SummerSlam match with Hennig, or the Survivor Series match with Michaels, or any of the rest, his legacy, and Vince McMahon's legacy will forever be tied together in wrestling history. The defining moment of both a Hall of Fame wrestler and the man who for a decade was the dominant promoter in the industry will be the moment that the world realized, right in front of their eyes, with no apologies, and with no turning back to re-write history, just how truly deceitful, to the core this business can be, and just how much 14 years of being one of the great performers in the history of the industry truly meant on the inside to the company that benefitted from it. Only the future can determine whether this was a defining moment in the balance of business when it comes to pro wrestling. Did McMahon really hand over the keys to Canada to WCW? Will fans really hate McMahon four weeks later when Michaels headlines a PPV show with a four star match? Will Hart be a huge success keeping WCW at its current level, or even taking them to an even higher level by having main events on PPV shows that can live up to the quality of the preliminary matches? Or are his best years really behind him and McMahon will have the last laugh at how much Bischoff paid for him? How long will Hart remain a cult hero to the wrestlers for doing what none of them had the guts to do and all at one time want to do? Will McMahon file criminal charges for assault? And will, someday, and stranger things have happened although in this case it would be hard today to believe it as possible, will the two get back together in a few years for a final triumphant run?

Epilogue: One of the first major moves when Vince McMahon Jr. took over the World Wrestling Federation from his father was on December 26, 1983, when the Iron Sheik captured the WWF title from Bob Backlund. The title switch was basically a prelude for Hulk Hogan winning the title a few weeks later. The finish of the match saw Sheik have Backlund in a camel clutch, and Arnold Skaaland, a former part-owner of the company who worked as Backlund's manager, threw in the towel signifying submission. Backlund remained with the company for the next eight months, largely buried in the middle of the card

despite being the face of the company for six years. After all the big gates he'd headlined, just a few months later, in August, McMahon, who was starting on the road to changing the entire face of wrestling and Backlund represented the old, asked him to die his hair and turn heel. He refused and was fired. Backlund spent the next several years claiming that he didn't know the finish of the match and was double-crossed on it when Skaaland threw in the towel. Everyone in wrestling heard the story but really very few took it seriously, figuring Backlund was just clinging onto a worked story to protect his image claiming he never really submitted and was robbed of the title. On November 25, 1985, before a match in Madison Square Garden, Victoria "Wendi" Richter, literally minutes before going into the ring for a match with Spider Lady in Madison Square Garden, was given a contract by McMahon and asked to sign off on all her merchandising rights. She actually didn't refuse to sign the contract, but said she wanted to read it before signing it because she was literally on her way to the ring. McMahon told her, actually she has claimed, demanded to her, to sign the deal. She told him to wait until after the match so she could read the contract and then maybe sign it. As it turns out, Spider Lady wasn't the wrestler who had been Spider Lady in the past, but was instead Lillian Ellison, better known as Fabulous Moolah. Although Lillian was probably closing in on 60 by that point, she maneuvered Richter into a position, and the unsuspecting Richter was held in position and had her shoulders counted out for the pin, and never worked in the WWF again. After the match and to this day, Moolah had always maintained to Richter, like Michaels to Hart, that she wasn't aware of the set-up either and the three count came as just as big a surprise to her. It brings to mind a few old sayings. History repeats itself. Leopards don't change their spots. Perhaps as much as we would all like to believe otherwise, deep down to its core, the wrestling industry really doesn't change either.

FAMOUS PRO WRESTLING WORLD TITLE DOUBLE CROSSES

1911 - Frank Gotch vs. George Hackenschmidt: One of history's most famous pro wrestling matches ever. Gotch, who became recognized almost universally as world champion with a win over Hackenschmidt three years earlier, was defending his title in the first ever rematch of the century. Before the match ever took place, Ad Santel, a noted "hooker" (an old term for submission expert or bonebreaker), a sparring partner of Hackenschmidt who as it later came out, was paid \$5,000 by Gotch's people to do so, tore out Hackenschmidt's knee. Because a record breaking gate was expected and achieved (\$87,000 in those days would probably be like \$8 million today), the show had to go on and the promoters kept the injury a secret from the public. Gotch, knowing about the injury, reached an agreement with Hackenschmidt, who wanted to pull out of the match due to his injury, to give him one fall in the best-of-three and carry him to a match where he looked credible. But once the match started, Gotch double-crossed him, winning easily and quickly in two straight falls.

1920 - Earl Caddock vs. Joe Malciewicz: Caddock, the champion, had already agreed to drop the title to Joe Stecher just a few weeks later in New York, but in this match Malciewicz shot on him and hammered him the entire match and was given the decision. The press, largely controlled in those days by the wrestling promoters, hushed up the match and the title change was never recognized.

1925 - Wayne Munn vs. Stanislaus Zbyszko: Munn was a 6-8 giant, especially for his time, and a college football hero, but he actually couldn't wrestle but he could draw football fans, so I guess that made him decades ahead of his time. Seeing box office, Strangler Lewis, who controlled the world title with promoter Billy Sandow as the Hulk Hogan and Vince McMahon of their eras, dropped the title to Munn to build up a successful run leading to it being returned in due time. Rival promoter Tony Stecher, whose brother Joe was a legendary wrestler

and rival of Lewis at the time for who really was the best wrestler around, put Zbyszko up to stealing the title. Two months earlier, to prove his loyalty to Sandow, Zbyszko put Munn over cleanly and professionally so they had no fear in giving him a title match. Once this match started, Zbyszko, one of the great true wrestlers of his era, although nearing 60 by this point, shot and beat him so badly the referee, one of Sandow's most loyal employees, had no choice but to stop the match and award the title to him to save Munn from more of a beating and prevent the Philadelphia fans from rioting from the farce of any other decision. Sandow got the commissions in Michigan and Illinois to erase this match and still bill Munn as champion, and as quickly as they could arranged for him to drop it to Lewis, creating two champions, while Zbyszko, on the same night as Lewis beat Munn, put over Joe Stecher as planned.

1926 - Joe Stecher vs. John Pesek: This match was at the Olympic Auditorium in Los Angeles. The two worked the first two falls of a title match with Stecher defending. In the third fall, Pesek, another wrestler who most experts of the time would rank as among the greatest wrestlers ever, double-crossed Stecher and beat the hell out of him, putting him in a double wristlock. But this was all for naught because the referee at that moment ruined the double-cross by disqualifying Pesek for no apparent reason. There was a major investigation by the athletic commission, but as was likely during that time period, the promotion probably bought off the commission and Stecher retained the title.

1931 - Ed Don George vs. Strangler Lewis: At this point, Lewis and Sandow had been in business with Northeast promoter Paul Bowser and all were making big money with Gus Sonnenberg, another football hero who couldn't wrestle, as champion. After Sonnenberg was beaten up on the street by a middleweight wrestler in a situation set up by their rival promoters, Bowser, without consulting Sandow and Lewis, had Sonnenberg drop the title to George, who had just come out of the Olympics and was another great wrestler. Lewis was waiting for his revenge, but did jobs for Bowser's wrestlers to show his loyalty, and a title match was set up for Los Angeles. As they got into the ring for a match George was supposed to win, Lewis came out and casually said that he was going to take the title and they could do it the hard way or the easy way. Since George knew he couldn't beat Lewis, he chose the easy way.

1931 - Strangler Lewis vs. Henri DeGlane: It took only three weeks before Bowser signed Lewis to defend the title in Montreal against Henri DeGlane, the 1924 Olympic gold medalist who had become a big draw. This was the famous battle of the bite we wrote about after the Tyson-Holyfield fiasco. Lewis went into the ring knowing he was going to win in three falls. After the second fall (in those days wrestlers returned to the dressing room between falls so they could have intermissions and sell concessions), DeGlane bit himself in the arm near the armpit until he drew blood. He kept the arm covered, went out for the fall, immediately started screaming like Holyfield did, Lewis backed off having no idea what was happening. The ref saw the blood and teeth marks and disqualified Lewis awarding the title to DeGlane. Lewis was so furious about the double-cross that he went backstage to do to Bowser what Hart did to McMahon, however Bowser was a little more ready, having six bodyguards all armed with baseball bats covering him, and Lewis, trying to play it cool, said he was quitting anyway and left for Europe.

1933 - Jim Londos vs. Joe Savoldi: In the history of American wrestling, Londos ranks with Hulk Hogan and Andre the Giant as the biggest drawing card ever. However, he had made enemies at this time with the promoters in New York, who had their own world champion in Jim Browning. The New York promoters set up the double-cross in Chicago by buying off both Savoldi and referee Bob Managoff (whose son was a champion wrestler of the next generation). Savoldi put on a submission and as planned, Londos made the ropes,

but Savoldi then put real pressure on, the ref pretended he didn't see Londos touch the ropes, called for the submission and awarded Savoldi the title. Savoldi then brought the title to New York and lost a unification match to Browning, giving the New York promoters a champion with even more credibility. The irony of all this is that over the next year, the crowds in New York started falling and they begged Londos to come back, and gave him the world title from Browning to get him back to save their business. The moral of this story is obvious.

1936 - Danno O'Mahoney vs. Dick Shikat: O'Mahoney, an Irish star who wasn't much of a wrestler, had turned into a monster draw in Boston for Paul Bowser, drawing several stadium crowds of around 30,000, and also drew well in New York for Jack Curley, and throughout the Northeast. In a match in Madison Square Garden, Shikat, considered one of the legitimately toughest men in the business at the time, was put up by rival promoters Jack Pfeffer and Al Haft, who were at war with Curley, to shoot on O'Mahoney and he destroyed him. The ref had no idea what to do about it. Shikat won the title, but then his promoters had him drop it just a few weeks later. Bowser in Boston continued to bill O'Mahoney as champion until he lost it a year later in Montreal to Yvon Robert. Many point to this match as the match, because it was a shoot, that exposed wrestling and killed the business in New York that it wasn't until the advent of Argentina Rocca some 15 years later that wrestling became lucrative at the Garden.

1950 - Don Eagle vs. Gorgeous George: Eagle was recognized primarily in Boston as world champion, and was defending his version of the title outside the territory in Chicago. This was in many ways the most similar to Hart-Michaels as ref Earl Mollohan double-crossed Eagle and counted him down when Eagle kicked out, then bailed out of the ring as quickly as he could with an enraged Eagle chasing him down the aisle. We've also heard disputes on this one saying that was actually planned as a controversial finish but the general feeling from those viewing the tape is that it was remarkably similar to Hart-Michaels.

1979 - Antonio Inoki vs. Bob Backlund: The previous week in Japan, Backlund dropped the WWF title to Inoki with the agreement that he'd win it back in their rematch and return to the U.S., with no title change ever being acknowledged in the U.S. The match is completely worked, and as planned, in the finish Tiger Jeet Singh interferes causing Inoki to lose the title back. Inoki gives the title back to Backlund. However, in the double-cross, after the match WWF President Hisashi Shinma ruled the match a no contest and said that Inoki was still the champion. This was a set-up by Inoki and Shinma, primarily because New Japan was scheduled to do a television taping about seven weeks later in Madison Square Garden on a WWF show and they wanted for their own TV purposes and ratings, for Inoki to main event the Garden, where he'd drop the title to Backlund. Vince McMahon Sr. was already building up Bobby Duncum as the big man of the month to work with Backlund. McMahon basically ignored everything, and as a face saving gesture, brought in Inoki to wrestle Iron Sheik and billed his match as for the WWF World Martial Arts championship, a title Inoki would continue to use for many years in the future both in Japan and the U.S. For Japanese television, neither Backlund nor Duncum entered the ring for the belt, nor was Backlund introduced as champion, and he was then given the belt after beating Duncum. However, all the pre-match hype in the U.S. for the match had Backlund defending against Duncum.

1983 - Bob Backlund vs. Iron Sheik (see page seven)

1985 - Wendi Richter vs. Spider Lady (see page seven)

1991 - Nobuhiko Takada vs. Trevor Berbick: While technically not a world title match, this was one of two mixed matches on a UWFI show in Sumo Hall. This match, featuring a former boxing heavyweight

champion, and another featuring James Warring, at the time recognized by the IBF as the world cruiserweight champion, against pro wrestler Billy Scott were expected by the Americans to be worked. However, once the bell sounded, Takada shot on Berbick, laying in a few hard leg kicks. Berbick freaked out, left the ring at 2:52 of the first round, and refused to come back out. Scott and Warring had worked out a match, and Scott was working with Warring early. When it came time for Warring to make his comeback and win, Scott shot on him, took him down and controlled him on the ground for the rest of the fight, which turned into a shoot, and Scott won the match via decision.

1994 - NWA title tournament: While also not at the time a major league world title, the NWA name was being resurrected by a number of small promoters, who had Tod Gordon's Eastern Championship Wrestling, ostensibly and really controlled by booker Paul Heyman, host a tournament to crown a champion. There was no double-cross in the ring, as it was agreed ahead of time, although reluctantly by some, for ECW's champion, Shane Douglas to win the tournament. It was after the match that Heyman, Gordon and Douglas double-crossed the rest of the NWA, throwing down the title belt and grabbing his own title while a shocked NWA President Dennis Coraluzzo was in the ring watching. Coraluzzo was tricked after the speech into doing a promo for ECW television stripping Douglas of the title, allowing Gordon to announce they were splitting from the NWA and forming a new company, Extreme Championship Wrestling, and recognizing Douglas as their first champion. Coraluzzo and ECW had been territorial enemies in the past, had mended fences for this show, and have remained enemies ever since with the exception of a peace truce between the two sides in 1997 that lasted for about 15 seconds before both sides claimed the other had double-crossed them again.

7. Shawn Michaels (Michael Hickenbottom) won the WWF title from Bret Hart in 12:11. As far as people worrying what would go on in the ring between the two, there was nothing but total cooperation. Michaels wiped his butt, blew his nose and picked his nose with the Canadian flag. The two ended up brawling, both in the stands and around ringside for 7:22 before the match ever started. They brawled into the stands and Michaels had so much heat it appeared fans were wanting to attack him themselves. The flag stuff literally had fans wanting to jump the rails after him. The heat Michaels has is incredible, it's like what we're all told Buddy Rogers had in his day. At one point Michaels punched Pat Patterson. At another point Hart and Vince McMahon, who watched the match from close range rather than broadcast the show, had words as they were brawling in the aisle. Michaels knocked down ref Tim White. Michaels took a header over a barricade near the dressing room door. Hart punched ref Jack Doan. Then the match started. They had a very good match, and it probably would have been an excellent match had they gotten to work all the way to their own planned finish. Michaels dropped Hart's face on the steps, then broke the Canadian flag and attacked him with the flagpole to the throat. Hart did the figure four around the post. There was a small chant of "Bret sold out." He put on the figure four in the middle, but Michaels reversed it and Hart got to the ropes. Hart got a few near falls before the referee bump with Earl Hebner leading to what no doubt will go down in wrestling history behind the scenes as one of the most famous finishes ever. ***3/4

More than one year after the actual event took place, it appears that the U.S. air date of the "Hitman Hart: Wrestling with Shadows" hopefully, Vince McMahon willing since half his booking ideas seem to come from attempts to gain some sort of personal retribution, will finally put closure to what without question will go down as the most famous ending of a match in North American history.

Bret Hart is among the leading candidates to be the pro wrestler of this decade. He's one of the best in-ring performers of this generation. Vince McMahon, is the most successful wrestling promoter ever, and from a historical standpoint is probably the most important one of all-time, although some would argue the latter point. Yet for all of Hart's great matches and all of McMahon's business accomplishments, the defining moment in both men's professional lives and possibly even what both will over the long haul most be remembered for, at least personally, is chronicled in this movie.

The documentary, which aired last month in Canada, and airs from 9-11 p.m. on the A&E Network on 12/20, has gotten unanimously positive reviews from every media source in North America that has reviewed it, which is amazing given the subject of the movie is pro wrestling. Certainly that is a first for any movie on pro wrestling, or even with a theme revolving around pro wrestling. The version of the movie on television will be the "Child Friendly" videotape version, with some language edits from the original version.

It was given an "A" in the 12/18 issue of Entertainment Weekly and a positive review for the movie, but not for the wrestling industry, in the current TV Guide in Phil Mushnick's "Sportsview" column and the most glowing review of all by film critic Barbara Phillips in the 12/14 Wall Street Journal.

The EW review states, "Bret Hart nails the essence of Shadows when he muses that, as phony as pro wrestling is, it's realer than people think. This artfully trenchant documentary shows how things got all too real for the grappling hero as he neared what he hoped would be a dignified retirement from the World Wrestling Federation. Turns out the league's own Dr. Evil, Vince McMahon, had other plans. More than that, though, it's a revealing gaze into the mechanics of the multibillion-dollar biz, and the musclemen who get ground up in its gears."

Mushnick used the movie as the backdrop for noting that pro wrestling's recent success has transpired without much critical inspection by mainstream journalists, who see wrestling as largely a cartoon world, and as Mushnick writes, "so a twisted, sickening industry grows wealthy while operating with impunity." Mushnick brought up the angle of a few months back where Kaientai went to castrate Val Venis, and noted the WWF being banned from the Catholic Youth Center in Scranton, and that pro wrestling's steroid problem and sudden deaths of performers in their 20s and 30s receive comparatively little attention.

Phillips, who said up until seeing this movie, she couldn't tell WCW from WWF and was not a wrestling fan, said "I was pinned to the living-room couch for the entire length of (the movie)." The review focused far more on the parts of the movie about the life of Hart growing up in a wrestling family, his relationship with his father, and Hart's take on his leaving the WWF, and actually barely touched on the movie's climax of what went on in Montreal, concluding by saying, "this is truly a knockout film."

I'm sure everyone seeing this movie for the first time will come to their own conclusions of what cannot be simplified into a black and white or right vs. wrong issue, although many will choose to do so. I'm going to save my own thoughts on this subject for next week's issue, after every reader at least in the United States that wants to see how the movie turned out has that chance to see it for themselves. But it is a situation where because one side is right, doesn't necessarily make the other side wrong, or where one side is wrong, doesn't necessarily make the other side right. Or where by pointing out wrong in one side, that may be and in this case probably is totally irrelevant in justifying wrong actions on the other side.

The movie did an excellent job with the story, but it was a movie produced to be a good movie while remaining accurate, and the

accuracy is overall excellent. But it is still a movie, and thus couldn't be bogged down in all the details that would confuse the general public and for that matter nearly all wrestling fans to the issues the movie itself is about. But those details are important to explaining the story as to what happened and why to those who want to know the real "Truth of November 9, 1997."

Whether Titan Sports will answer back in a forum other than another year of petty booking attempts at humiliation of Hart, either by mocking the finish on nearly every show, or humiliating Owen in Canada, either in its publications, on its web site, or even on its Raw program the next night, doesn't seem certain. There are varying schools of thought as to what the company's public reaction will be. Clearly those who state the movie isn't a big deal to them haven't followed the storylines of Raw, which took an abrupt turn to mimic events of the movie, and even of that night in Montreal which ended up not in the movie, for much of the last 13 months in some form. But the mimicking picked up in a big way after McMahon had received an advanced copy of a rough version of the movie, and has continued strongly through events of this past week.

There are schools of thought as to why Titan shouldn't answer back, being that the portrayal of McMahon in the movie is consistent with their storylines. But at previews, it was clear even to the general audience what in the movie was storyline and what wasn't, and only the densest wrestling fans won't be able to point out the "evil" Mr. McMac-man on television and the very real Vince McMahon in the movie that the television character derives are as different as the real person, and an actor playing a role he was born to play.

Realistically, the company on television has spent the past year doing almost nothing but answering back to a degree that has been often entertaining, and at times perversely pathetic. Some of this is direct, much more in a sly manner.

Hart, in media interviews promoting the movie, has stated that from what he understood, the two things that upset McMahon the most about the movie is that, unbeknownst to him, it contained a brief portion of the actual conversation where they discussed the finish hours before the match in Montreal basically proving that McMahon had agreed to a DQ finish, which Hart believes basically shows he was the one telling the truth, since McMahon originally portrayed it to everyone as Hart in their conversation that day refusing to drop the title anywhere at any time, although he clearly was not going to do that specific job. But long before the movie came out, it was common knowledge McMahon agreed to a finish and double-crossed Hart, and reluctantly even admitted on TSN's "Off the Record" by McMahon himself, but only when backed into a corner by Michael Landsberg. The other was the scene of a shaken, disheveled McMahon limping out of the locker room after coming out of the short side of a one punch knockout, which to this day he tries to categorize as his valiantly allowing Hart a "free shot" to the face, a version of what happened contradicted by nearly every eye witness to the incident. The former point in a sense was bad news for McMahon, because his personal credibility due to his portrayal of the events as Hart refusing to do business at the end to not only the rest of the employees in his company, but to the boys themselves, is shot in the movie. Even with the company flourishing, it's a trust level among the top guys, even when they get along with him, that can never fully be had. His claims were that Hart had refused to drop the title at all, as opposed to simply not wanting to do it in Canada for Michaels.

The fact, which wasn't spelled out in the movie, was both sides had already agreed before the match in Montreal where (Springfield, MA), when (December 7, 1997) and how (in a four corners match with Michaels winning) the title would change hands, even though as it turned out, neither side truly wanted it to end that way.

The movie, accurately, makes it clear Hart refused to lose to Michaels in Canada and he clearly had the contractual right to do so. He still had three weeks left on his contract to drop it anywhere else. He also had an agreement from Eric Bischoff that he could work eight extra days with the WWF while on the WCW payroll starting in December, if necessary, to drop it on the next WWF PPV and give a farewell speech on Raw the next night, if a PPV show as opposed to a Raw taping or a house show was the forum McMahon wanted to change the title on. Hart, a few hours before the match in Montreal, did suggest, but did not come even close to demanding, a change in the agreed upon scenario to where he'd simply vacate the title and give a farewell speech the next night at the live Raw in Ottawa, wanting to go out as champion and do his farewell in an environment where it would be guaranteed the best possible crowd reception, all of which McMahon agreed to. However, the wheels had been in motion for McMahon's plan long before Hart came in with that suggestion.

As to why, there are several theories. Hart, and people close to him, in hindsight, believe McMahon was planning almost from the day he signed the 20-year deal, to find a way out of the contract and that he never intended to honor it. Their belief is that McMahon felt due to the timing of Hart as a free agent being the biggest star in the company, coming on the heels of Kevin Nash and Scott Hall jumping and WWF at its lowest point in history when it comes to TV ratings (even though actual live attendance wasn't bad at that point in time in 1996), that he feared Hart leaving and the public reaction to it to the degree he'd do anything to keep him. As these negotiations were going on, there were several periods where WWF higher-ups conceded the probability of Hart going to WCW, on the grounds that WWF, which at the time was operating rather deeply in debt, legitimately couldn't afford to match the WCW contract offer (a \$2.8 million annual base salary for three years plus merchandising and other percentages that pushed the total to around \$3 million). McMahon talked of things like loyalty and family and offered a 20-year contract to prove it. Was McMahon bitter from almost the moment he signed him for a wrestler putting him in that kind of position? Did McMahon hold a grudge when Hart wouldn't tear up the WCW contract live on Raw during his interview saying he was WWF 4 life, as requested (a decision that in hindsight was the smartest one Hart made during that entire period) and plot to ruin his career? Or did things just turn out the way they did because McMahon was locked in the most bitter fight of his life, his company was in debt, and probably more important from an ego standpoint, and if you haven't learned by now that the pro wrestling business from almost all sides is run far more for ego enhancement than for maximizing profits, he was losing the big publicized fight every Monday night, and whatever he was doing with his top characters was just what seemed to be the best thing at that moment to try and turn around that fight. I'd suggest the war with WCW and making money for his company was the main focus of his booking, and not attempting to ruin the career of Hart by putting him in the title match (against Sid) too early after his return and him not winning, giving him that one-day title reign after Shawn Michaels walked out rather than jobbing for Sid, and having to put Sid over on Raw to create the most financially disastrous Wrestlemania in history with Undertaker vs. Sid in the title match, and then turning Hart into a strong heel, and months later, back into a half-ass babyface for the inevitable showdown with Michaels that had been brewing for 19 months. One look at the booking of Undertaker this year should show that plans aren't made this far in advance and even with the top guys, the storylines when looked back on make absolutely no sense. How things turn out is more a subject to how the winds blow. In the middle of that bitter of a promotional war, my belief is that McMahon was far more concerned about winning than flattening out the character of his highest paid performer, but there are other unpublicized scenarios, not at the Hart level, but consistent with the Hart scenario in McMahon's negotiating recent past. Hart's personal viewpoint in hindsight as to why does seem to be the most popular theory that I've heard. Either way, the end result of the hotshot booking, of giving him the shot too fast, making him a one day champion, going heel, then half-ass face

with him, did succeed in flattening him out to a degree, but even so, he was the biggest PPV draw for WWF in 1997 and at the time he left was one of the hottest wrestlers in the business. His match with Michaels in Montreal was still the WWF's biggest money PPV show and match of that year.

As it turned out, McMahon felt a younger Michaels and Steve Austin had surpassed Hart and were grooming them for the top two spots, which left Hart and his \$1.5 million per year contract (which didn't include any bonuses for headlining PPVs or for merchandise sales) being double what Michaels was earning, and at the time, many times what Austin's base was. And at the time the company was losing money. Hart's contract, which at this point no doubt McMahon felt bitter about because he felt Hart had somehow forced him into the deal by negotiating with the enemy (McMahon is notorious in all controversies for only seeing his side of the issue), was something he wanted restructured for months, to ease weekly cash flow problems. One top WWF official stated to me in the days after Survivor Series that McMahon promised Michaels, who was younger and some would argue better and was threatening to quit the company after a backstage fight with Hart that he came out on the short end of, that he'd get rid of Hart to pacify Michaels. Of course McMahon has denied that, and he's the only one who knows the true story, and the one whose answers have been somewhat vague and even so, his credibility in most of his remarks on the subject as time went on ended up being shot to hell. In published interviews with Michaels after the fact, he certainly seemed well aware of the idea that McMahon was forcing Hart out. The fact also is that McMahon did change his tune when the company's finances turned around (ironically during the period when Hart was the main heel draw) and Hart could have stayed for the 20-year deal, although he may have just been saying that to get Hart to agree to do the job or it may have been an honest appraisal of the situation. Either way, it was clear he'd no longer be the top guy in the company. When Bischoff put another big offer on the table (believed to be \$7.5 million over three years with a 120-date maximum as opposed to his 180-date maximum with WWF) and while he could stay with WWF, he wouldn't be the top guy, a spot he was basically promised when he originally chose to smaller money offer and longer-term deal in the first place, he chose the WCW deal.

McMahon's first request for Hart to lose the title to Michaels in Montreal took place on October 21, 1997, but McMahon promised him it would be a one month deal with Hart regaining the title on December 7. McMahon had one month earlier, on September 22, 1997, told Hart in Madison Square Garden that the company was having financial problems (and from all concerns, the company was in debt at this time and there were reasons, and we're not clear what, that it was important to operate out of the red) and that he couldn't afford the contract. Months earlier McMahon had opened discussions with Hart about changing the structure of the deal, promising to pay him his full amount at the other end or when PPV revenue came in, but wanted to considerably lower his approximately \$28,800 weekly check, nearly in half, proposals Hart refused because he didn't trust he'd get the money at the other end. Clearly the portrayal of some watching the movie of Hart being duped by a man he trusted isn't altogether accurate, as his wife Julie Hart, now ex-wife, wasn't the only one who didn't trust McMahon. It appears Hart's "mistake" was that he did fully trust Earl Hebner and thus allowed himself into "the position." If he did fully trust McMahon, he wouldn't have called the film crew which had already finished shooting all the wrestling scenes for the movie, to document his final week in the WWF, nor would he have been secretly wired (which was actually a suggestion from Julie). There had already been a scenario a few weeks earlier where an angle was done to position the Hart Foundation as racists, writing the dreaded "n" word in graffiti in the dressing room of the Nation of Domination. Hart was upset at that angle and refused to do it, basically being okay at being anti-American, a portrayal he could justify to his Canadian fans at home within his basically self-written storyline, as he was trying to protect his

image in that country long-term, but not as being a white racist, which wouldn't fly in Canada either. McMahon had the angle done anyway, largely using Michaels' interviews to suggest things that were done that Hart had actually refused to do, going so far as calling Hart "The Grand Wizard," a Klu Klux Klan leader reference.

McMahon suggested that if Hart wouldn't agree to restructure the deal, that he was going to breach it, which would make Hart a free agent. Knowing he'd be able to do so anyway once the deal was breached, it was hardly magnanimous of McMahon to suggest Hart look elsewhere, ie WCW, to see what he could get. After being shaken up by the conversation, a few days later, Hart actually asked for legal permission to do so and the two sides worked out a deal where Hart could negotiate until the end of October. Based on a contract clause, if Hart left, the creative control would kick in for the final 30 days.

What McMahon's actual thought process was at this time is something only he knows. Did he believe WCW wouldn't come close to its original offer and thus he really wasn't risking losing Hart? Did he believe Hart really wouldn't leave, because he had already turned down an offer of a lifetime one year earlier? Or did he want him out? Given the realities of business at the time, he couldn't have believed WCW wouldn't be interested, but he may have believed Hart really wouldn't be interested in leaving. Given the situation in the business at the time, it's hard to believe he wanted him with the opposition, although he has after the fact stated he wanted him out, although he clearly wanted him earning less money and arguing less about his programs. When Hart made the decision to leave, McMahon and others in the company tried to portray the decision by Hart as being about nothing but money.

Hart, who at the time the request to drop the title to Michaels was given, was under the impression McMahon was going to breach his contract, plus given his personal animosity with Michaels, who had many times refused to job for him and others in the company including coming up with some pretty clever excuses every time he was supposed to drop a title in the ring, and the fact the match was in Canada, was reluctant to do so. It should be noted that at this point in time, Hart was working without a net. There was no bonafide deal from WCW at this point in time. McMahon felt the ball was in his court as Hart at this point had no leverage.

Whether it was to soften Hart up for doing the job for Michaels, or simply the truth, three days after asking for him to lose to Michaels in Montreal and being turned down, McMahon told Hart the company's finances had turned around (which looking back on things appears to also be true from a time line standpoint) and he was going to honor his 20-year contract in full without deferring payments. Bischoff, who doesn't do anything until the last minute, knowing that Hart had until November 1 to make up his mind, gave him a huge offer on October 31. Hart went back-and-forth with McMahon the next day on scenarios for his WWF future, which were still Hart losing in Montreal and regaining the title one month later in Springfield, MA. Later that night McMahon changed the scenario, this time with Hart losing in Montreal but regaining the title on January 19 in Fresno before dropping it to Austin at Wrestlemania. It did appear by the nature of the proposal by this time McMahon did want Hart out, since he laid out a scenario where Hart would be losing four of his next five major matches, three to Michaels. Ultimately he was going to be positioned behind Austin and Michaels on the pecking order, and based on that, combined with the bigger offer elsewhere, he made his decision to leave.

So McMahon wanted him to lose, but by giving notice to leave, Hart had reasonable creative control over the next 30 days. McMahon came up with numerous scenarios to get Hart to agree to lose in Montreal, all of which were screw-job finishes and none of which Hart would agree to. The idea pushed the hardest at the end being The Hart Foundation turning on Bret and costing him the title in Montreal, thereby making Owen Hart, Davey Boy Smith and Jim Neidhart into full-fledged heels

in Canada as well for screwing the Canadian hero and their own family member in Canada, and giving that group some heel steam, particularly in Canada, they'd lose for their biggest star not being a part of their group. On November 2, McMahon and Hart agreed to a DQ finish and the scenario of Michaels getting the title in a final four match which would include Undertaker and Ken Shamrock, where Hart wouldn't be the one to do the job for Michaels. Bischoff also agreed to the deal since technically the match where Hart was to lose the title would take place after his WCW contract started. That finish changed several times during the week, including a plan suggested by McMahon on November 4 for Hart to beat Michaels clean, which McMahon claimed that Michaels had agreed to, only for McMahon to call Hart up the next day claiming Michaels had changed his mind, and in that conversation, McMahon went back to insisting Hart lose the title because the news was out that Hart was leaving. When Hart said he wouldn't lose it in Canada, McMahon suggested losing the title on November 8 in Detroit, the final house show before Montreal. Hart vetoed that idea, feeling he had to come into Montreal due to all the hype for the match which had taken on a life of its own, particularly in Canada due to all the pub and rumors, holding the title belt or the match would become flat and totally anti-climactic, but was willing to drop it at any house show once they left Canada. By this point, heat between the two has developing behind the scenes, with Hart being very critical in the Canadian media of the new direction of the company, bringing up both sexual and racial angles in particular and the exploitation of Brian Pillman's death the next day for ratings, including the specifics of the angle he was portrayed in that he'd refused to do, saying he wouldn't let his kids watch the television anymore. As told by McMahon to protect the PPV business (ironically, in the markets where it was common knowledge Hart was leaving, PPV business was more than double the markets where it wasn't common knowledge), Hart hinted he might be leaving but never quite said it. McMahon responded with his own press release, obviously mad at Hart's criticism, believing Hart's criticism of the product were to position himself as the babyface in the split, noting Hart himself had sworn doing an angle on live television, when McMahon believed it was all about money and not about product content.

The feelings between the two heightened when Hart was asked to do a job in a six-man tag on November 7 in Toronto (Undertaker & Austin & Mankind vs. Hart & Davey Boy Smith & Neidhart) for Austin's stunner, and refused saying it was in Canada and he was the only Canadian in the main event thinking it was the wrong thing for the show. His creative control had kicked in, and partner Neidhart did the favor. McMahon and others in the company tried to position this internally as Hart refusing to job to Austin, who he had no heat with, noting that Austin had put Hart over in their previous year Survivor Series and Wrestlemania matches. The next night in Detroit, Hart was booked by the office once again to do the job in the same six-man, but the agents at the building didn't even bother asking him, and asked Neidhart instead. Somehow in the miscommunication, the word got to the office that Hart had refused again, this time not in Canada, which is where some in the office thought he wasn't "being business," although McMahon himself knew the truth about Detroit as well, as their conversation in Montreal shows.

So nothing was truly settled regarding Montreal, although the finish talked about from all accounts at the production meeting the night before was still a DQ, leading to a title change to Michaels at the final four in Springfield. There is some circumstantial evidence that leads me to believe that the night before there were people aware of the planned double-cross, with the unanswered question being Jim Ross' hotline report and pre-game show report that "this could be Hart's final match in the World Wrestling Federation," when the storyline idea agreed on was that Hart would be around for one more month, including the next PPV show. The fact McMahon wouldn't be doing the broadcast as usual had been part of the meeting the night before. There was also a production sheet where it listed playing Michaels'

music at the end of the match that was printed up a few days before the match.

There is clear proof in documentation form that the day before Montreal, Hart was willing to lose the title to anyone but Michaels, and he later even changed his tune regarding Michaels, anywhere but in Canada.

Which leads to what actually happened in the conversation. What aired in the movie was edited down to a few sentences regarding the specific finish agreement, which makes what some would say was the key point of the movie, and quite frankly, without Hart being wired, this entire story would be simply one man's word against another's, something McMahon no doubt was figuring when he started talking on the issue. While the movie was much more than the finish of the Montreal match, it was that finish that gave it its dramatic conclusion. The basics of the conversation, McMahon and Hart agreeing to the DQ finish, but not the conversation itself, is already well-known by now to virtually everyone in and around this industry, except for those who are still so smart that they believe this was all just an angle.

This is the actual conversation, and also not the complete version because much of it dealt with things having nothing to do with the match and the period leading to the match, but this is an exact version of what went down as it regarded the match. The parts not mentioned here are non-relevant issues such as the story behind Remembrance Day (the holiday in Canada which took place the night of the match):

McMahon: Have you given some more thought on what you'd like to do?

Hart: I think what I'd like to do is get through today, and I think tomorrow I should go in and do my speech and forfeit the title. I think everyone on the planet knows, and I think it allows me a chance to leave with my head up and leave in a nice way. If I lose anywhere, everyone knows I'm going to lose. They're waiting for it. And then at the same time for the next few weeks I can have matches where I think people would be kind of sympathetic. I got the feeling last night in Detroit that they, well, they kind of booed me, but I was a heel all the way through the match until the end of the match. Then when I walked around they, everyone was very emotional. People were crying, hugging me. It was like a ten minute walk around the ring. I don't think, they dropped, it was not a work anymore. I think that's the right way to do it.

McMahon: Sensing that, it seems like everybody knows. There does seem to be that sympathy factor, too.

Hart: I think I would feel really good about that. It would make me feel better. Me and Shawn could take the edge off. I don't have to beat Shawn. We could have a shmazz (run-in non-finish) or whatever you want. For me, I don't have any authorization or permission (from Bischoff) to do anything more than what I asked them. I haven't spoken to anybody.

McMahon: That's what Pat (Patterson) told me.

Hart: All I know is that I asked them, can I do a final four match on the 7th? And they said 'that's okay.' I don't really know if you want them dictating anything to you or me either. But I don't really have the right to call them back and say, 'They changed it. I'm working a single match on the 7th.' They might say, well, that's not what you promised, or not what you said. The same about tomorrow (on Nitro). I haven't got, but I believe I will get some kind of word from them that, because I expect to hear from somebody even today, that I can try to get them to stop, or to not announce that I'm going anywhere. I wonder if it's even worth it now. Everyone knows.

McMahon: It's probably not.

Hart: But I would feel much better doing that. It would give me the right, I'd feel, I'd like to leave and say nice things and leave with.

McMahon: Yeah. I'm all for that. One of the things I want to ask you about is, what exactly did you mean in that TSN interview when you said something to that extent of, that it's not (the situation regarding Hart's decision) what it appears, and that's true. It's not. But I didn't know where you're going with, what the hell was that phrase, the deceitful business practices?

Hart: I don't know. I was kind of scrambling. I have no idea. To be honest, I felt pretty bad. I felt bad about having to sort of.

McMahon: Address it.

Hart: Well, I kind of felt bad that I had to fight as hard all week long to sort of leave with my head up. I thought it wouldn't be such a hard fight.

McMahon: Well, I appreciate that.

Hart: I thought, it's kind of been really hard. I broke out in cold sores and everything. I've been so stressed out on it. Even in Toronto when they asked me to do the job in the six-man. Geez, why would they beat the only Canadian in the match, in Canada, in Toronto? It's like almost like you, if you wanted to aggravate me or really keep pushing my.

McMahon: Stick you with a stick.

Hart: Yeah. It's like jeez, I didn't have a problem last night or anywhere else. But it just seems like, it wasn't, well I didn't think it was a very good call.

McMahon: Well you and I have. . .

Hart: If it's going to start to get nasty, like where it's, well I don't want to get nasty. I never ever wanted to leave here with any kind of bad feelings. But this week has been a bad week for me. I feel it's been really bad for me. I feel kind of betrayed a little bit.

McMahon: Well, I do too a little bit. And it hasn't been a good week for me either. And like I said before, I'm determined this is going to wind up the right way. Because it should. And it should. So let's just make it that way.

Hart: Work backwards.

McMahon: Yeah.

Hart: And go forward again.

McMahon: Yeah.

Hart: Well, that's what I'd like to do.

McMahon: Okay.

Hart: I think it would be the classy way to go. I think it would be applauded by all sides. I think people would look at it as a nice, nice exit for me. Everyone knows. (They're thinking) How's he gonna exit? How's he gonna leave? I think it's the right way for me to go. I've never had a problem putting somebody over. I don't so much have a problem putting Shawn over, mind you I don't appreciate some of the things he's said, but my biggest thing is I think how this thing has been depicted, like the way it's aimed, it's really hard for me as a hero here to come up short this weekend, or tomorrow or the next day. And I've had nothing to do with the word getting out.

McMahon: I know that.

Hart: All I've tried to do is fend off the.

McMahon: And again, as I mentioned to you when we had these conversations, all we're talking about is really is Ted Turner. That's what's coming between you and me. And that's all. I can't tell you how appreciative I will always be for everything you've done for this company. And like I said in our previous conversations I'd just be damned even though it's Ted Turner's money and Ted Turner's all that kind of shit, that's no reason for two people who have spent as much time as we have spent together through the years and have worked as closely as we have had through the years, it's no reason to have any problems.

Hart: I couldn't agree more. I didn't want to leave with any problems. Actually I didn't want to leave at all. And then it's a point where you just, it seemed like there was no other choice but to go. But I've had a lot of hard feelings through the week I think over just what I thought should have been a fairly easy, I should have been able to leave fairly easy for just for what I've put in. (at this point the discussion breaks from the subject talking about other wrestlers, the fax machine story that is in the movie, WCW, what he wants to be remembered as a wrestler for, his legacy, and working with Hogan and his hoping the WWF would never erase his history from their history).

Hart: I guess that's kind of why I've been so stubborn about this because for my 15 years here, it's been such a great story. . .

McMahon: Uh, huh.

Hart: Well, it's 14 years, to see 14 years here, to have it end in 20 minutes on a low note or a less than grand note just, I'd rather not have it at all. I'd rather not have any of it. I just take so much pride in everything I've ever done here, my Wembley match, my matches with Shawn (Hart starts going over his WWF career here and says that so many guys had their best matches with him)

McMahon: I think there's no doubt. Not only the guys that are here now, but the guys that were here and left, and haven't had a good one since.

Hart: Well, I'm gonna miss this place a lot. I'm already feeling it. It was really, really hard. It was hard in the (Maple Leaf) Garden and it was hard last night. I'd rather not get into a big head-butting thing over this thing. I'd rather look forward to working the next three or four weeks and leaving with my head up and just telling my story with a nice, I don't know what you want to do with me for the next three weeks. If I go in tomorrow, I'd like to say something really nice. I never intended to have any bad comments to make and leave it on that.

McMahon: Okay.

Hart: It feels better. You never know. You might have me back here anyway.

McMahon: I'd love to.

Hart: What would you want to do today then?

McMahon: I don't know, maybe some sort of a, well we always have DX there to interfere. I'm trying to rack my brain thinking about doing something like this whereby it won't end too, you know, if you had Shawn in the sharpshooter for arguments sake and then DX feeds in, you can have Hunter take a bump and that sort of a thing to not make it too flat. Take a swing at Chyna and let her fall down or I don't know if you want to do that or not. I'm trying to think of something. Rick (Rude) could slip on his ass or something.

Hart: Would I have my guys out there?

McMahon: I wouldn't think so. I wouldn't think DX would be out there either until I think it'd be a run-in type thing. But I'm open to anything. I don't think the WWF would allow with the magnitude of this match, the way we've got this whole thing written, the situation where it goes, the marks out there are thinking this is going to be a shoot. I want to capitalize on that. I'm not going to work as a commentator so that I'm back here to make sure this match gets in the ring. It adds that, in the free-for-all (the pre-game show), that's going to be brought out and so forth. Not that Vince is a big deal. I'm just trying to say that all focus is on this match getting in the ring. We'll get a shot of like, we've got some uniformed, they don't look too menacing, but we've got some uniformed security guys that are going to be hanging around once the show begins. So the idea is we're trying to keep you two away from each other in the locker room because we know that's happened before. We're trying to build that tension all the way through. When you have that in mind, I don't think that the WWF would allow DX to go down with Shawn. That would take away from their classic of a match. You have to ultimately have some control of the match.

Hart: Yeah. Alright. Why don't I go find Shawn? We'll start working on the match. I think if they do come down and even though I maybe nail everyone at the end, I think maybe it'll get a pop if I nail Chyna. Especially if she's, it might be the thing to do. It got a pop wherever it was the one time I hit her. But maybe Owen and them could come down after just so they don't look bad.

McMahon: Whatever.

Hart: Even if they get there as they're leaving just so they're there.

McMahon: Whatever you want.

Hart: I'll go find Shawn and come back and then I'll come back.

McMahon: I put Pat with your match (Patterson was the one who suggested the spot where Michaels would get Hart in the sharpshooter and Hart would reverse, which ended up being the spot where the double-cross was pulled). He's the master. Work it through.

Hart: Okay.

It should be mentioned that at no point were voices raised. Even the passages that seemed heated reading them on paper were very soft-spoken on both sides, actually somber and almost apologetic when either on paper appeared to be disagreeing with the other, and even emotional on both sides as they talked about Hart's imminent departure, even if reading the words in spots appeared heated. Hart's reactions were similar to that in the movie, as were McMahon's. In hindsight, it did appear McMahon was having pangs of conscience in the tone of his voice, but that also could have been to disarm Hart. If it was the former, I guess not enough to change his plan. The bottom line is that, despite a lot of what has been said and misinterpreted on this subject, there were no demands made by Hart nor McMahon, or for that matter, even disagreements, the day of the show that caused what happened to happen. There were no refusals of any ideas by either side. There was nothing even close to an argument whatsoever of either the finish or any of the other subjects broached that weren't covered in this because they aren't relevant to the story and the finish but were in the conversation. There wasn't a moment that either wasn't cordial in tone, even when both were expressing the tension from the past week from their prior conversations and how the story had gotten out during the week.

The true reasons McMahon decided to handle it the way he did are unknown. Those who should have been in the know said afterwards that McMahon was afraid of what Hart might say in a live interview the

next night, not that he would say anything bad about WWF as they all knew he wouldn't, but that he might say something positive about WCW, and get himself over stronger as a babyface in the process while leaving for the opposition. McMahon wasn't happy Hart called WCW an honorable organization in his lengthy interview when he announced he was staying with the WWF for the rest of his life more than one year earlier. No doubt the nature of the planned screw, losing in his own hold in his own country was designed to ruin him in the country where he was the national wrestling hero and a big box office draw and had nothing to do with the phrase "time honored traditions of the business" (well, actually it did, because in many territories screwing the guy who was leaving the territory was a time honored tradition) that McMahon coined on Raw when trying to give his side of the story without totally exposing what happened. Why he was so vindictive is something we can only speculate on.

The cover reason McMahon and his officials were publicly giving, that they were afraid Hart would show up at Nitro the next night in Memphis displaying their belt, as time has gone on, was also proven to not hold any water. Even the fear of Bischoff going on Nitro the next day with the announcement that Hart, the WWF champion, had signed with WCW, which while not completely alleviated, most likely could have been, and was actually addressed by Hart in this conversation. It was McMahon who said it wasn't that important because the whole world already knew anyway. When Hart said he'd try to get the announcement delayed if McMahon wanted it that way, it was McMahon who said not to bother. Even then, Hart said he still wanted to get the announcement delayed, because he himself wanted to be the first person to publicly state he was leaving the WWF, on Raw, in Ottawa. So whatever the real reason was is something McMahon publicly hasn't wanted to admit. The most recent time he was asked this question publicly, just last week at Oxford University, he dodged the real answer by doing a half-ass version of his heel character and saying that he has balls the size of grapefruits. Was McMahon simply trying to ruin Hart, particularly in Canada, where he'd be WCW's top draw if the company started running regularly in a country McMahon basically has had to himself for more than 14 years? Was he simply trying to gain revenge for Hart so publicly knocking his product and give a message to the boys about speaking out so vehemently against his new direction? Was he mad because Hart had negotiated the reasonable creative control clause into his last 30 days, and more so had the audacity to use it, thereby putting McMahon in the position where legally he didn't have the final say-so in the title match on his own, what turned out to be, biggest show of the year, and he just wanted to make some sort of a point? Refusal to do a certain job on a certain day couldn't have been that big a deal since at the very next PPV, Austin refused to drop the IC title in the ring to Rock on the day requested, or any other day for that matter, and they had to create a scenario where the belt was stripped. A few weeks later, Michaels refused to drop the European title to Owen, and instead handed it over to Hunter, who was supposed to lose it to Owen, although that never happened either. Or was Hart simply an unwitting pawn in McMahon's eyes in his much bigger at the time war with Bischoff and this was his only way to stick it to Bischoff? The first reason appears to be the one that makes the most sense but that doesn't mean it's the accurate one. Actually the last one makes the most business sense but in hindsight there has been so much personal vindictiveness aimed at Hart after this all went down that this double-cross appears to be more to stick it to Hart than Bischoff. Ironically, with Hart in tow, WCW as it turns out didn't even run one show in 1998 in Canada.

WRESTLING WITH SHADOWS

There are so many things shimmering under the surface of Hitman Hart: Wrestling with Shadows that it must be watched two or three times. Bret Hart should be proud of this movie. Its substantive ambitions will be more enduring than the boundary less product he criticized. The passing of time will provide some poetic justice if this

treasure of a documentary shines and shames all those who cooperated in screwing Hart for their various short-term reasons. Major thumbs up.

Kevin Donlan
Baltimore, Maryland

I hadn't felt so "out of the loop" since I started reading the Observer six years ago. Everything for the last six weeks has been "Bret movie" this and "Bret movie" that. Finally, I've seen the movie. It deserves everything said about it. No one, wrestling fan, casual viewer, non-fan, can deny just how powerful and how real this movie is. Until "Wrestling with Shadows," I was pretty convinced this whole situation was a well orchestrated work. No longer. How real is wrestling to Bret? He'd rather die than do a job for Dino Bravo. That says it all. No wonder Vince plays such a great asshole on Raw. Tributes blew me away.

Michael Roper
Chapin, South Carolina